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ABSTRACT

Institutional research, as an established profession, has not developed a professional code of ethics. Reasons for the lack of such a code are discussed, and an outline is presented of the three major areas of institutional research ethics: treatment of research participants, research practices, and socio-political dimensions. A simple procedure of ethical analysis (the Ethical Analysis Protocol) is introduced as a method of analyzing the ethical appropriateness of institutional research studies. The ethical analysis procedure, which uses a list of questions that may be helpful in assessing the ethical strengths, constraints, or shortcomings of institutional research studies, is described in detail. Contains 10 references. (Author/GLR)

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ETHICAL ANALYSIS IN INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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This paper was presented at the Thirtieth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at The Galt House, Louisville, Kentucky, May 13-16, 1990. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
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ABSTRACT

Institutional research, as a profession, has not established a code of research ethics for practitioners of institutional research. This article discusses some of the reasons why this has not occurred. It also outlines three of the major areas of institutional research ethics: treatment of research participants, research practices, and socio-political dimensions. The simple procedure of ethical analysis is introduced as a method of analyzing the ethical appropriateness of institutional research studies. Ethical analysis is accomplished by using the **Ethical Analysis Protocol**, which is a list of questions that may be helpful in assessing the ethical strengths, constraints, or shortcomings of institutional research studies. This topic is of concern to anyone interested in improving institutional research practices and in the development of institutional research as a profession.

INTRODUCTION

One mark of a mature or a maturing profession is the establishment of standards of professional behavior based on a recognized set of principles and practices (Committee on Professional Standards, 1987). The profession of institutional research, as practiced in the United States, has a history that has been traced back to the 18th century (Doi, 1979; Tetlow, 1979). Unfortunately, the longevity of a profession is not necessarily correlated with its level of development. To date, the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), which is the major national organization of institutional researchers in higher education, has not endorsed or published a code of research ethics governing the practice of institutional research. Recent publications outlining the practice and function of institutional research (e.g., Muffo & McLaughlin, 1987; Saupe, 1990) are prominently lacking in any discussion of research ethics within the profession. Ideally, reflection and training in ethics should be an indispensable step on the path to becoming an institutional research professional. However, formal coursework dealing with ethics is not a required part of most undergraduate and graduate programs that lead to a career in institutional research. A sensible way to fill this gap is through the adoption of a code of ethics to guide institutional researchers in managing ethical problems related to their work in higher education. The construction of these ethical guidelines should be a high priority activity for both AIR and the profession of institutional research as a whole.

There are undoubtedly multiple reasons why institutional researchers and AIR have been slow to create and endorse a set of ethical guidelines for institutional researchers. One of the leading reasons is that most institutional researchers are formally trained in disciplines that have adopted codes of conduct. For example, institutional researchers trained in psychology tend to follow the American Psychological Association code of ethics in research, those trained in sociology are apt to follow the American Sociological Association research ethics guidelines, and so on. Thus, many institutional researchers probably feel that there isn't a need for a separate statement of research ethics to govern the activities in which they are now engaged. But, those ethical codes concern research practices within those particular disciplines and professions. The lack of an ethical code that is geared to the demands of institutional research limits the development of a professional identity for institutional researchers that is distinct from other professions. Institutional research must have an internally generated set of principles and standards to which anyone claiming to be practicing institutional research must

adhere.

An equally compelling reason to warrant a distinct code of research ethics for institutional researchers is that the ethical demands of institutional research are significantly different from those of the traditional research disciplines. Although institutional researchers share certain research methodologies, procedures, and practices with other disciplines, institutional researchers must deal with a myriad of subtle and thorny ethical problems and situations that are inherent in the practice of research in an institutional setting. As Mirvis and Seashore (1979) state:

> (S)ocial and behavioral scientists... are not fully prepared for the challenge of being ethical. The ethical problems encountered in... real-life settings take on unique and disconcerting features arising from the fact of social organization... Researchers are dealing with a social system composed of people who have positions in a hierarchy and who, in their collective identity as an organization, also have relationships with supporters, consumers, government, unions, and other public institutions... They cannot single-handedly manage the ethical dilemmas that arise because they are a weak force in a field of powerful ones, with only limited means for ensuring moral actions or for redressing moral lapses. (p. 766)

Mirvis and Seashore were commenting on the situation of outside, independent researchers coming into an organization to do research. The situation of an institutional researcher, who is resident within the hierarchy of an institution and who has been hired with the specific purpose of doing research on and for that institution, is fraught with even greater ethical perils. Institutional researchers are themselves subject to the formal and informal norms of the educational institution in which they are employed. They are also subject to the specific role requirements within that institution as well as to its interpersonal power dynamics. As Mirvis and Seashore and others have pointed out, researchers need certain kinds of support to anticipate and to deal with ethical dilemmas. Institutional research is still a growing profession, largely because of the increasing complexity of institutional environments. That is, it falls upon institutional researchers to sort out much of the information, processes, and data that contribute to this complexity. Thus, it becomes crucial to support both new and

seasoned institutional researchers by providing them with a set of ethical standards or guidelines that address their unique concerns and circumstances.

A code of research ethics should be generated by selected representatives of the profession, e.g., a panel of experts or an ethics commission, etc. Until that task is undertaken and completed, ethical analysis is an expedient alternative that will help to raise the ethical awareness of institutional researchers. Ethical analysis is a process that hinges on the Ethical Analysis Protocol. The protocol consists of a list of questions, categorized by subject, that can be used in various ways to elicit information about the ethical assumptions, constraints, and implications of institutional research studies.

Ethical analysis derives, in part, from the idea of the committees on research with human subjects that have become fixtures at most universities and colleges with scientific research programs. Typically, a research proposal must be evaluated and sanctioned by an ethics committee before the research can be conducted. For various reasons, most institutional research does not get screened by committees such as these. Ethical analysis is a way for institutional researchers to manage that process themselves. It will allow institutional researchers to scrutinize their own research or to have others assess their research from an ethical point of view.

A main requirement for using ethical analysis is consistent application, which means getting in the habit of asking the relevant questions from the Ethical Analysis Protocol. Another necessity is a bit of imagination. The questions should be used as a point of departure for playing through possible scenarios, both mentally and in conversation with others. An additional recommendation is to broaden the scope by sharing the process and the protocol with others. Using a mix of persons with different levels or types of research expertise will uncover a range of ethical issues and concerns. The promise of this method is the added assurance, from an ethical perspective, as to the credibility and integrity of one's research proposals, plans, studies, and thus, of one's personal and professional reputation.

The Ethical Analysis Protocol is a set of questions on treatment of participants, research practices, and socio-political dimensions. These questions, when asked and answered, then become the framework of ethical analysis. The three areas of questions that furnish the framework for ethical analysis are not mutually exclusive. They overlap at many different points. The ethical analysis protocol is listed later in the paper, but a general description of the three areas of ethical analysis in institutional research is provided in the following section.

ELEMENTS OF ETHICAL ANALYSIS

Treatment of Participants

One of the main areas of concern in the statements of most professional associations concerned with research is the treatment of research participants. At various times, institutional research activities may treat students, faculty, staff, and even community members as research participants.

Voluntary Participation

The accepted standard in the research community, and in the legal community, is that when using human beings in research their participation must be entirely voluntary. Following this logic, it would be unethical to ask students in a class to fill out a classroom survey without first telling them that participation was voluntary. This standard may also apply to the recent controversy over whether assessment tests and their subsequent placements should be mandatory or voluntary.

Confidentiality

Another standard of practice in research with human participants is confidentiality. In carrying out surveys or similar types of studies, the researcher must guarantee the privacy of individual responses and other personal information. All data analyses should be at the group or aggregate level. Further, the data for individual respondents should be keyed by identification numbers, as names should be removed from active data files (although still kept on record). The institutional researcher is also responsible for training research or clerical assistants in confidential procedures. On some types of research projects it may be advisable to have research workers sign a mutually accepted agreement covering expected duties, research procedures, and treatment of data. An additional aspect of confidentiality is security. This is especially critical in open offices that employ individuals with differing levels of authorization to access computer data files. Leaving a terminal or PC unattended that is logged on to a research or other confidential data file can lead to a breach of the privacy of information. And, if an unauthorized person gains access to personal records in this manner, confidentiality will be violated, the law may be broken, and the college will ultimately be responsible for the consequences.

Research Practices

The two main areas of ethical concern in research practices are integrity and competency.

Integrity

Because the findings of institutional research studies are most commonly intended for use in decision making and may have an influence on organizational policy and practices, institutional research studies must be held to the highest technical standards. In practice, this means that a research design and a matching research methodology should be chosen with care. It means that the researcher has the available resources to provide accurate data and to complete the study. Equally important is the reporting of results. In general, negative or undesired results should still be reported. However, these results must be placed in context so that the implications of such results are not misinterpreted and blown out of proportion. It is especially important when reporting negative results to understand the audience to which these results will be reported and to try and anticipate the potential areas of misunderstanding or controversy. Even though research results are routinely summarized for popular consumption, whenever possible the details of the research must be reported in full, with particular attention given to information or special circumstances that may bear on the interpretation of the data. Any other qualifications and limitations of the data should also be detailed, including errors in design, methodology, or analysis.

Integrity also involves the elemental values of honesty and trust. In an era where ethical scandals have rocked a number of major institutions in this nation, many sectors of higher educational institutions and the communities served by those institutions are suspicious of institutional research or dubious as to its value. In response, institutional researchers must actively cultivate trust. Failure to do so will result in a loss of credibility with as well as support by our various constituencies and stakeholders. An important step in cultivating trust is to embrace a commitment to provide accurate and honest information. The presentation of fraudulent information or even information that is slightly "fudged" or assumed to be "in the ballpark," has the potential to destroy both trust and credibility.

Competency

Institutional research covers such a broad range of subject matter and research methods that it is doubtful that any one person possesses the breadth of skill and experience to be competent in every area of institutional research (Dressel, 1979). However, this observation does not absolve researchers from the basic requirements of competency. Institutional researchers should only employ research methods for which they have been trained or with which they have some prior professional experience. In part, institutional researchers

are communications specialists. One of the basic charges of institutional researchers is to deliver timely and reliable data. The delivery of timely and reliable information is only possible when researchers stay within their training and their abilities. For most institutional researchers, to become or to stay competent in a field that is increasingly dependent on developments in information and other rapidly evolving technologies, continuing education and training is a long-term or life-long commitment.

Socio-Political Dimensions

The socio-political dimensions category describes aspects of personal practices, roles, socially sensitive research, and institutional politics.

Fairmindedness

Although institutional researchers, like other social and behavioral scientists, project a mantle of objectivity in their work, true objectivity in social research may be impossible to obtain. A more realistic goal may be Kurt Lewin's conception of fairmindedness in social research. Fairmindedness entails an assessment of one's personal limitations and biases, whether they be cultural, social, or political. That is, by being up front about one's biases, the impact and influence of those biases on one's work can potentially be reduced. This process will allow the researcher to conduct a less biased or a fairer treatment of the issues.

Roles and Role Conflicts

In their interactions with other individuals in the organization, institutional researchers assume or are placed in a number of different roles. How the researcher understands and views his or her own position will have an effect on the type of research generated as well as its intended purpose. Many times, roles are ambiguous and there is some confusion as to exactly which role the researcher should fill. At other times, the roles of the researcher come into conflict. Both ambiguity and role conflict are important because they can lead to serious ethical dilemmas for institutional researchers. A classic example of role conflict would be the desire of the institutional researcher to be a loyal team player versus the duty to uphold the tenets of research by maintaining an unprejudiced stance in program evaluation.

The role conflicts of institutional researchers become magnified when other persons in the institutional hierarchy place specific role expectations on the behavior of the researcher. The more levels of the hierarchy that perceive themselves as having a stake in the research, the greater the likelihood of clash due to competing

and specialized interests. To compound the situation, persons not having a research background will often be operating from a different set of ethical assumptions than the researcher. These assumptions may point to incompatible paths of action. In many instances, the institutional researcher may then be caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Hence, no matter what stance the researcher takes or how the research comes out, someone will be bitter or disgruntled at the result and the researcher will be the focus of their discontent.

Another type of role constraint and potential ethical problem for institutional researchers involves the roles that accompany the use of certain methods and techniques. Institutional research is a blend of both management science and social science. For that reason alone, institutional researchers are asked to conduct studies on and to provide information about a dizzying array of topics. When an institutional researcher carries out a policy analysis, a study of affirmative action trends, a causal analysis of student attrition, a study of enrollment projections, a survey of former students, or a time series analysis of budget information, there are often supplemental role expectations, beyond the role of researcher, that are linked to these various types of studies. For instance, in providing projections or forecasts, there may be an expectation or desire on the part of other individuals that the institutional researcher can accurately foretell the future through statistical methods. When the nature of projections and forecasts and other methods and techniques are not well understood, then problems are likely to arise around unmet role expectations.

Socially Sensitive Research

According to Sieber and Stanley (1988, p. 49), socially sensitive research "refers to studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research." Many of the studies routinely carried out in offices of institutional research are socially sensitive in nature. Whenever institutional researchers examine the effects of such variables as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, they are doing socially sensitive research. A main ethical concern in doing socially sensitive research is in how the results will be used. One of the basic principles of research is that the research should in no way do harm to the participants. Therefore, a researcher who undertakes socially sensitive research must also accept the fundamental obligation of guarding against the misuse or abuse of their research results. The researcher cannot allow the results of a socially sensitive research study to be used as a justification to foster or to continue an inequitable practice that may harm research participants and the social groups that they represent.

Sometimes, a study may begin with a seemingly neutral subject, e.g., the cost effectiveness of various methods of assessment, and soon be involved in socially sensitive areas. To continue the example, a study comparing an objective English placement with a holistically scored writing exam will probably find that the objective exam is more cost effective. That may, in fact, be the determining criterion. However, the researcher is under an ethical constraint or obligation to verify that the more cost effective method, i.e., less costly method, does not have a detrimental impact on specific student groups. If it does, then the potential consequences of that impact must be figured into the cost effective equation. That is, there are both qualitative and quantitative cost factors to consider when such a situation occurs.

Institutional Politics

As employees of an institution of higher education, institutional researchers are subject to the same political influences and pressures that affect other employees. Though politics are a seemingly unavoidable part of institutional life, researchers must be diligent in protecting their research from political exploitation. An example of this phenomena would be a manager using the results of a qualitative program review to tighten his or her control over the program staff or singling out individual employees to blame for all of the negative evaluations. Researchers can also be pressured to go beyond the facts and to judge the merit of certain items, programs, or practices. When it is not possible to avoid these pressures then any judgments should be qualified as being your personal opinion and not as a conclusion derived from data.

Summary

Although little appears to have been formally documented regarding ethical standards for institutional research, it is hoped that this article will promote further discussion and writing in this area. The authors believe that the use of the ethical analysis protocol can prove to be a valuable tool to institutional researchers, to their supervisors, and to the many persons who are touched by the practice of institutional research on a daily basis. We also hope that this article helps to establish a general framework for and an understanding of the ethical requirements and implications of research conducted in an educationally-oriented institutional setting.

Ethical Analysis Protocol

The items on this protocol apply to various stages of institutional research. Some of the items apply to research still in the planning stages. Other items are more concerned with evaluating the ethical status of a work in progress or a work that is already completed.

Treatment of Research Participants

1. How will the participants be chosen for the study?
2. How will the participants be contacted and recruited for the study?
3. Does the research procedure include informing the potential participants that taking part in the research is entirely voluntary?
4. Do the research participants understand that they have the right to refuse to be included in the study?
5. What are the potential risks to the participants? Have these been spelled out clearly to them?
6. Does the research contain built-in procedures for protecting the rights of participants?
7. What measures will be taken to preserve the confidentiality of the data?
8. Will the names of the participants be maintained on file with information pertaining to the research study?
9. Do the planned data analyses protect the privacy of individual responses or individual performance?
10. Have confidential procedures been formalized?
11. Have members of the research staff been trained in confidential procedures and general ethical behavior?
12. Have measures been taken to protect the security of the data base?
13. Are multiple levels of security codes in use?
14. Are all staff aware that terminals and PCs are not to be vacated while active data is on the screen? Is this procedure followed even for temporary absences?

Research Practices

15. Is the research design simple? Will it allow for the collection of data that will answer the research problem?
16. Are the research techniques or research methods to be employed suited to the problem at hand? Were they chosen to yield a particular result?
17. What is my experience and the experience of the research team with the methods employed? Is that experience adequate to carry out a competent investigation?

18. Are the planned data analyses appropriate to the research method employed and type of data collected?

19. If the results of the study are meant to generalize to all students or participants, are all student groups represented in sufficient numbers that group differences can be discerned?

20. Is the information in my report both timely and accurate?

21. Are the methods and the research procedures clearly and completely described in the summary report?

22. Are special circumstances or events that took place during the course of the research study fully reported? Are other limiting factors reported?

23. Are errors reported? Are they reported even if they were discovered after the results were put into report form?

<u>Socio-Political Dimensions</u>

24. How have my personal opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors influenced various aspects of the research process?

25. Have my personal biases exerted an undue influence on the study? If so, have I discussed this as a qualifying factor in the interpretation of results?

26. How do the various roles in which I serve impact on the research process?

27. What kinds of roles do other people in the institution expect me to fill?

28. What kinds of expectations follow from these roles?

29. Could they or will they have an influence on the research?

30. Does being a team player mean not producing or reporting results that show the school in a less than flattering light? If so, what are my responsibilities as a research professional? Do they outweigh my loyalty to the school and to the administration?

31. Who has a stake in the outcomes of my research?

32. What are their likely reactions to negative results? Positive results? Ambiguous results?

33. Do other people in the institution understand the research process?

34. How adequate are the proposed or mandated deadlines for completion of the study?

35. What are the consequences and costs for the research if it is not completed on schedule?

36. Is there pressure to achieve a certain percentage in the return rate for my survey? If so, have I sacrificed the right of voluntary participation to my need for a high return rate?

37. If negative results are reported for a particular group, has information been included to clarify that result and put it into an overall context that is connected to other research results and information?

38. If negative results are reported for a particular group, have I continued to keep track of policy decisions based on those results to guard against their misinterpretation and misuse?

39. What have I learned from the research process?

40. How can I improve the ethical standards of this research next time?

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